



**Interview with Alvin J. Brown (1897-1983)  
on the history of the Towlston Road area in Great Falls, Virginia  
Conducted by C.J.S. Durham on March 27, 1975**

**[start of transcription]**

**Durham:** Well this is Alvin Brown and having a little conversation in late March 1975. We're going to talk a little bit of history.

**Brown:** Okay.

**Durham:** What's today, man? What's today, March what?

**Brown:** Uh.

**Durham:** Twenty? Well.

**Brown:** I forget.

**Durham:** I'll look on the calendar and see what it is. Yeah, March 27<sup>th</sup> and it's a nice clear day. Well a little overcast here and there. It was ripe cold this morning when we got up. It was about thirty over here, our place. How cold, well you said you didn't look at the thermometer at your place.

**Brown:** No, I didn't. I forgot about it. I know it was cold.

**Durham:** Yes, you and Guy Payne have been out getting some stumps out of the ground. Those stumps have been in there fifteen, twenty years, Alvin. I'm certainly glad to get them out.

**Brown:** Yes. How long have you all been here at this place [Towlston Grange]?

**Durham:** Well, we got this place in 1933 and we moved in in 1937. We got Elwood Lyon to do the restoration work on it. You know Elwood was born in this house?

**Brown:** Well I had forgot that. I know that a lot of people lived here.

**Durham:** Who were some of them if you remember?

**Brown:** Well, Hall. Man named of Hall lived here.

**Durham:** Remember his first name?

**Brown:** I'm trying to remember. Bill Hall.

**Durham:** What?

**Brown:** William, I guess.

**Durham:** William Hall?

**Brown:** But I always called him Bill Hall.

**Durham:** Bill Hall.

**Brown:** And he was from down, I think around Cherrydale, Virginia.

**Durham:** Cherrydale?

**Brown:** Yes.

**Durham:** Yeah.

**Brown:** And then there was—

**Durham:** Was he white or black?

**Brown:** White.

**Durham:** Did he have family?

**Brown:** Oh yes, he had family.

**Durham:** Bunch of children?

**Brown:** Bunch of children.

**Durham:** You don't remember anything about them, do you?

**Brown:** I don't know what ever become of them. I was thinking about them the other day. I don't know how I come to think about them, but I was thinking and I said well, sometime I see Vernon Leigh I was going to ask Vernon if he knew where they went, but they left here. Then there was my mid-wife lived here. They were from down at on the Georgetown Pike. Shirleys.

**Durham:** Oh, Shirleys?

**Brown:** The Shirleys.

**Durham:** Did they go to St. Louis?

**Brown:** No, I think they died.

**Durham:** Oh, they died. Shirleys.

**Brown:** They died. Just a man and his wife. They were here and I remember it very well. They were here in 1917.

**Durham:** 1917.

**Brown:** Because I was working for Mr. Iden at the time. And she stayed here. Well at night she stayed here by herself. Her husband worked at night. I forget where he worked but he worked in Washington, but I don't what kind of a job he had.

**Durham:** Yes, I believe I have a reference to the name and an old article in the *Washington Evening Star* of 1918 by a columnist who called himself The Rambler. And I think they meant J.D. Shirley, I think was their initials. I'm not sure. We can check that out. Well, did they have family or were they—

**Brown:** No, just the two of them.

**Durham:** You don't know where he worked, do you?

**Brown:** No, I do not. I know that he worked at night, but I don't know whereabouts. He'd catch a car over to D.C. on—

**Durham:** On the Old Dominion.

**Brown:** The Old Dominion.

**Durham:** Where would he go to catch? How would he walk? Which way would he walk to get to the car line, the Old Dominion?

**Brown:** Well he could walk down through here. Walk through here and then go across. Well it was my uncle's place. Then there was pasture there.

**Durham:** Well your uncle's name was what?

**Brown:** Lott Sharper.

**Durham:** Lott?

**Brown:** Lott Sharper.

**Durham:** And he was a brother of Dan?

**Brown:** That's right.

**Durham:** And a brother of Fred Sharper.

**Brown:** That's right.

**Durham:** Dan Sharper and Fred Sharper Now where did Lott live?

**Brown:** Just cross the Towlston Road.

**Durham:** What is now known as the Old Tolson Mill Road.

**Brown:** The Old Tolson Mill Road. He lived between that and the Milk Road. Cause the Milk Road came in from Berry's. They had to carry milk in from Bellevue.

**Durham:** Oh, Berry. Which Berry was that?

**Brown:** Well Dal and Ed.

**Durham:** Dal and Ed Berry?

**Brown:** Lived around there. Milk dairy over there.

**Durham:** Where did they live? Did they live somewhere near the Pike? Leesburg Pike?

**Brown:** One lived at on the Pike and one lived down near the barn. The old barn is down there yet. The dairy barn, it's down there yet. Oh, I don't know somebody was taking about it the other day and they said I think they have some kind of community place, something I don't know just what. I couldn't say.

**Durham:** Made out of the barn?

**Brown:** Out of the barn.

**Durham:** Uhuh. Is that old barn on the Gilbert Berry place, they call it now?

**Brown:** Oh no, that was on— well it was the Berry brothers then. In fact, it was the old Berry estate there. Now what Gilbert, what you're referring to I guess, Gil was back in the woods there. I think that was his—

**Durham:** Well what I'm talking about is a farm right across from the school. Is that Spring Hill School, isn't it?

**Brown:** Oh no. No, that's Elgin's down there.

**Durham:** Oh, I'm thinking of Elgin's.

**Brown:** Yes.

**Durham:** No, no, no, no.

**Brown:** Berry's right here to this.

**Durham:** Oh, Berry is in Woodside.

**Brown:** In Woodside, yes.

**Durham:** Oh, yes, yes, yes.

**Brown:** Then they had this road cut. Here's woods.

**Durham:** Did Berrys cut the road?

**Brown:** They cut the road.

**Durham:** Themselves. Which one? What were their names that cut that road?

**Brown:** Dal and Ed.

**Durham:** Who?

**Brown:** Dal and Ed.

**Durham:** Dal and Ed.

**Brown:** And they run the road down there. It was on May property, see. It was right down May's line. May Run Swayze(?) carried the milk to Bellevue.

**Durham:** Carried the milk to Bellevue. Now where is Bellevue? Where would we spot Bellevue?

**Brown:** Well Bellevue is right behind of Bellview Road and Old Dominion Drive. That's where—

**Durham:** There was a station.

**Brown:** A station there.

**Durham:** Called Bellevue.

**Brown:** Bellevue.

**Durham:** A station on the Old Dominion.

**Brown:** That's right. They carried milk at one time, they carried it to Dunn Loring.

**Durham:** Dunn Loring?

**Brown:** Dunn Loring.

**Durham:** There was a railroad there, wasn't there?

**Brown:** That's right. But later years, they carried it over here until later on why they had milk trucks coming by picking it up, see?

**Durham:** Oh yeah. Now I'm going back to the people who lived in this house, do you recall any names of any more besides the Halls and the Shirleys?

**Brown:** I'm not too sure. But I think that there was a man living here by the name of Barbee.

**Durham:** Barbee?

**Brown:** I'm quite sure he lived here. But that was way back, I was quite a youngster.

**Durham:** Would that have been before the Halls lived here?

**Brown:** Yes, that would have been before cause when the Halls lived here why I was – well I was up enough that I came here one time I think my father and I killed hogs. He had two big hogs down at that spring and he wanted us to kill it for him. We killed.

**Durham:** Barbee had hogs?

**Durham:** No, Hall.

**Durham:** Hall had the hogs.

**Brown:** Hall had the hogs. Well I was large enough to kill the hogs, but when Barbee lived here, I was a youngster, quite a youngster. Cause we cut through here sometimes going to the store.

**Durham:** Which store?

**Brown:** Oliver's Store.

**Durham:** Oliver's Store. Yeah.

**Brown:** Sometimes we'd go out go through about the church back here and go on up. But sometimes you'd come—

**Durham:** Go by the church you mean, what was the name of that church?

**Brown:** Bethel Church.

**Durham:** Oh, Bethel Church.

**Brown:** Bethel Church.

**Durham:** And how old do you think you were about that time?

**Brown:** Well, I'd say about eight or nine, maybe. Maybe nine.

**Durham:** Yeah, maybe nine. How old are you now?

**Brown:** Seventy-seven.

**Durham:** Ooh, you're still spry at seventy-seven. I bet you could hop around me right now.

**Brown:** I'll be seventy-eight, twenty-second of May in a few weeks.

**Durham:** Twenty-second of May?

**Brown:** Yes.

**Durham:** Well, I'll be darned. Do you remember any more folks that lived in this house before the Barbees?

**Brown:** I can't say that I do.

**Durham:** Or heard the names of any of them?

**Brown:** I might've heard the names, but I can't recollect now.

**Durham:** Just who they were, huh?

**Brown:** Just who they were.

**Durham:** Now, Lawrence Leigh told me that when we bought— well we saw the house. It was just all run down terrible shape you know? And no roof on it, no chimney or anything and the field was just a bunch of briars and they had twenty tons of hay in it. And Mrs. Durham told me you mentioned to her one time that you helped put some of that hay in here.

**Brown:** Sure did.

**Durham:** Well how much ground did that cultivate back in those days?

**Brown:** Well this field over here they put in this field here—

**Durham:** The field between us and the lavatory now?

**Brown:** That's right and this fence was on over to the left. They put that in. And they had one field back next to that other road over there. That was a—

**Durham:** The Old Towlson—

**Brown:** The Old Towlson Mill Road. I think it was eleven acres on that piece. And then over there the side where that pool is over there, well they had two fields there. They had to cut off I forget how much was in each field.

**Durham:** You say over the other side of what? That pool?

**Brown:** That pool over there.

**Durham:** Oh, the pond.

**Brown:** Right in there.

**Durham:** Yeah, yeah.

**Brown:** I forget about many acres was in it but anyway they always put in a quite a bit. The Leighs put in quite a bit because they'd always keep six or eight horses.

**Durham:** The Leighs did?

**Brown:** Horses and colts and when everyone began to get old why they'd had another one put in its place. Yeah, they had always kept good horses.

**Durham:** I believe Lawrence told me that his farm here was about one-hundred and seventy-five acres.

**Brown:** Something like that.

**Durham:** Something like that and of course they used the horses back in the early days certainly as motive power for the plows and the combine.

**Brown:** That's right. Yeah, he didn't get a tractor until after he was [inaudible].

**Durham:** After World War I?

**Brown:** Oh sure, way after.



**Durham:** Way after World War I. Of course, he was in World War I too, wasn't he?

**Brown:** That's right. Yeah, they didn't get a tractor. Oh, it was, I expect it was in the late [19]30s, middle or late [19]30s.

**Durham:** Middle or late [19]30s.

**Brown:** Before he got it a tractor.

**Durham:** Is that right?

**Brown:** And he got a little, little tractor. Lot of people had that same size tractor now for a garden, but he got that and then after the boys came along, why they got larger tractors.

**Durham:** I wonder how they operated this farm while he was in the war? Who was in charge of it you reckon?

**Brown:** Well, his brother, Mr. Leigh, Harry Leigh, he worked this down here and worked his too.

**Durham:** I see.

**Brown:** And they could get some help you know?

**Durham:** Mhmm. Well they got you.

**Brown:** And his boys, they were around home at that time.

**Durham:** They were?

**Brown:** Oh yes, they was there.

**Durham:** You mean, which boys?

**Brown:** Vernon and Alfred. Course Lewis now, Laurie why he didn't do very much while at home on the farm. (Laughter) He didn't do much.

**Durham:** What'd he do? He just played around?

**Brown:** He played around. He was a great book man. He'd look at his books you know?

**Durham:** Oh, he studied the books?

**Brown:** Studied the books.

**Durham:** Yeah, that's why—

**Brown:** Well Vernon, he's a great worker. He's always working. He went to— well I guess that must've been back in the teens, he went to West End High School.

**Durham:** That's right.

**Brown:** And he walked through here. Walked on down—

**Durham:** Well you mean he followed that little creek there?

**Brown:** No, there was a path over where the lav is. Path went through them woods over there and then went on through Marcos(?). And he'd get up and milk cows [inaudible] gone and catch the streetcar, see?

**Durham:** Where'd he get on it, at Bellevue?

**Brown:** Bellevue. Come back in the evening and do the same thing.

**Durham:** I'll be darned. He'd take care of the cows?

**Brown:** Yeah, take care of the cows.

**Durham:** He didn't have much time to study then, did he?

**Brown:** Not a whole lot of time.

**Durham:** Yeah. After supper.

**Brown:** Course, Mr. Leigh he was there and they always kept somebody around there, you know, working there.

**Durham:** Who? Which Leigh was there?

**Brown:** Harry Leigh.

**Durham:** Harry Leigh.

**Brown:** Born and raised down there [inaudible] Vernon.

**Durham:** So Harry sort of operated the farm?

**Brown:** He operated there. Then he had a man there that stayed there with the Leighs. And he'd look after his family [inaudible]. Yeah, they got along. They got along good.

**Durham:** Yeah, that's fine. Well I tell you, do you remember the name of Lawrence's father?

**Brown:** Cass.

**Durham:** Cass Leigh.

**Brown:** Cass Leigh.

**Durham:** That's right. And he'd be the father of—

**Brown:** Him and Doctor Leigh were brothers.

**Durham:** He and Doctor Leigh were brothers. And what was Doctor Leigh—Hassell Leigh, wasn't it? Well that— No. What was the first name of the doctor?

**Brown:** The doctor? Alfred.

**Durham:** Alfred Leigh.

**Brown:** Alfred.

**Durham:** That's right. Now, you were telling me the time the other day that you were sick one time and Dr. Alfred Leigh took care of you. I believe you had typhoid fever?

**Brown:** That's right.

**Durham:** Is that right?

**Brown:** That's right.

**Durham:** And you got over it?

**Brown:** Yes.

**Durham:** Well tell us about that.

**Brown:** Well there was a lot of them that didn't get over it. There was several people that died away. But I got over it and he came out to see me and my father and his son Cass. Cass is already dead now. He died here a few years ago. He had it and my father said, how are you going to come to see my boy and you got one man sick? And in turn he said, well that's alright, I'll take care of that. Well he went and got another doctor, Dr. Tibbs. Look after his boy and he came out to see me.

**Durham:** Oh, I see.

**Brown:** And he put me on buttermilk and of course I wanted water, but I couldn't have no water. Doc gave me a little bit. And my mother went out to see about the

chickens one day and the fever was so that I went to jump out the window and she heard me and she came back and the longest kind of time at night cause I laid down on these great big wheels. I could see them just as plain as they was there. They'd be rolling. Made an awful noise and I just couldn't stand the fever.

**Durham:** Yeah, they created an illusion of these great big wheels in your mind.

**Brown:** Yes.

**Durham:** You had a hallucination. Yeah.

**Brown:** And so I began to get better. I never will forget it and it was one October pretty Sunday and there were several came out to the house. They was out in the yard there, sitting out in the yard and I was in the house and there were some boys, girls came by and they had been picking chinkapins.

**Durham:** Chinkapins.

**Brown:** So they gave me chinkapins. I don't know how many I eat, but I know I had a pile, a whole and I didn't hide them, I left them there and my mother came in after they'd all gone. She came in and she looked and she said, you going to die sure. Eating those chinkapins see, because he didn't want me to eat anything.

**Durham:** Oh, Dr. Leigh didn't want you eat anything?

**Brown:** He didn't want me eating anything.

**Durham:** Yeah.

**Brown:** A little bit of broth, chicken broth, of course that wasn't nothing. And you know, I began to get better from eating those chinkapins.

**Durham:** They didn't give you a stomachache?

**Brown:** Never hurt me at all.

**Durham:** Never hurt you at all. How old were you then if you remember?

**Brown:** I was eight years old.

**Durham:** Eight years old?

**Brown:** Yes sir.

**Durham:** When were you born? What year?

**Brown:** 1897.

**Durham:** 1897. That'd be about 1904 that you had the typhoid fever?

**Brown:** Yes.

**Durham:** Something like that. Three or four. Well what house were you living in then?

**Brown:** Right where I'm living now.

**Durham:** Right where you're living now.

**Brown:** Yes sir.

**Durham:** Yeah, I declare. Now, speaking of houses, what is the earliest name that you heard attached to the place that Mrs. Foster lives in now, Mrs. Bonnie Foster? Did you say one time that that belonged at least to one of the people to Mr. Powell?

**Brown:** Well it belonged to his wife's mother.

**Durham:** His wife's mother?

**Brown:** Mrs. Hitaffer.

**Durham:** Oh, yes.

**Brown:** It belonged to the first one was Smith.

**Durham:** Smith?

**Brown:** A man by the name of Weather Smith. I heard my mother talk about it.

**Durham:** Oh, Weather Smith.

**Brown:** Weather Smith. And then—

**Durham:** Uh, go ahead.

**Brown:** I don't know how or when it— how Mrs. Hitaffer would come to be the owner of it, but she was the owner of it in later years. And then after she died, why then Mr. and Mrs. Powell until he sold.

**Durham:** What was his first name that you called Mr. Powell?

**Brown:** Oh, Walter.

**Durham:** Walter?

**Brown:** Walter Powell.

**Durham:** Yes, I think he— back in those early days I think he was an overseer or superintendent of Madeira School. Is that right?

**Brown:** No. I tell you, you're talking about his son.

**Durham:** Oh, his son?

**Brown:** William Powell.

**Durham:** William Powell.

**Brown:** William worked on the farm and Ralph Powell he was a secretary of the Madeira School.

**Durham:** Which one was?

**Brown:** Ralph Powell.

**Durham:** He was what?

**Brown:** He was secretary of Madeira School.

**Durham:** Secretary.

**Brown:** And then in later years, he left Madeira School and went with the Capital Transit and he was a lawyer. He studied law and he went for his exam and he died or he was killed at Capital Transit.

**Durham:** Yep, he did.

**Brown:** But I met him on M Street there one day right in front of the car barn and he told he me that he came out to Madeira School maybe a week or so, but he didn't work there regularly like he had been.

**Durham:** Yeah. Do you want to let him go or do you want me to ride you back or do you want to go with him?

**Brown:** Well, I'll tell you, I'm going with him because I've got another little job to do, Mr. Durham.

**Durham:** Oh, I see. Alright. So let's run out there and catch Guy before he gets away.

**Brown:** Okay.

**Durham:** We'll see you.

**[end of transcription]**

**Transcribed by Chris Barbuschak, June 2020**